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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000014

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: AYATOLLAH AL-SADR LEANS TOWARD ALLAWI FOR PRIME MINISTER

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires David C. Litt for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

1. (C) Summary: On December 31, Baghdad's most senior Shi'a cleric Ayatollah Hussein al-Sadr told Ambassador Khalilzad that Ayad Allawi would be the best Prime Minister for Iraq, if Allawi can temper his rhetoric. Sadr also supported current PM Ja'afari for the presidency. Sadr was concerned about rising sectarian divisions in Iraq. The Ambassador agreed with Sadr's view that the new government should be non-sectarian and representative of all Iraqis and advised that candidates for key positions should be able to attract broad support. We need to encourage moderate trends in Shi'a Islam, such as those represented by Ayatollah al-Sadr. End Summary.

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Iranians in South, Kurds in North, Threaten Division  
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2. (C) Sadr praised the December 15 election as the beginning of the path for Iraq to democracy and freedom, but noted that Iraqis voted largely along sectarian lines rather than for political platforms. The Ambassador agreed with this assessment. As a result, they agreed, the sectarian rift between Sunni and Shia has grown. This threatens to weaken Iraq, said Sadr, who feared increased Iranian influence - especially in southern Iraq - as a result.

3. (C) Sadr felt that Iranian influence has permeated Iraq's nine southern provinces. With the regional oil wealth, he feared further Iranian interest in the south. Sadr vowed his love for Iraq over Sunni or Shia sectarian divisions. He implied that Iran's different history, culture, and understanding of Islam threaten further division within Iraq.

4. (C) Regarding Kurdistan, Sadr said the Kurds would already have created their own state, if they had a strong enough economic base. He implied that, as the economy improves there, Kurds would push harder for independence. Sadr emphasized the importance of Kirkuk to the Arab community in Iraq and warned that the Kurds would support Shi'a control of the south simply for the chaos this would create. In such a vacuum, the Kurds could more easily stake full claim to the three provinces in which they hold a majority.

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No to Mehdi, Yes to Allawi in the New Government  
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5. (C) The Ambassador advised Sadr to help create a national unity government with officials who are competent, representative of all Iraqis, and free of militia affiliations. He also said the Council of Representatives' choices for the new ministers of Interior and Defense should have the confidence of different ethnic and sectarian groups. Sadr suggested Zargis abu Sarmak, a former MoD advisor to Ayad Allawi, as the new minister of Defense.

6. (C) Sadr felt that Prime Minister Ibrahim al Ja'afari is "the best of the bad options" as the next president because "he makes decisions based on his own convictions." Sadr complained that Vice President Abd al-Mehdi, on the other hand, cannot make decisions because President Jalal Talabani is a "dagger at his belly".

7. (C) The Ambassador pointed out that the United Iraqi Alliance (555) will likely be eight to ten seats short of a majority in the Council of Representatives. As a result, they will need to propose candidates for the major positions whom the other representatives broadly support. Sadr said the best candidate outside of the 555 for Prime Minister is Ayad Allawi-- if Allawi adopts a more moderate message. Sadr added that Vice President Abd al-Mehdi should not hold a major role in the new government because his "Islamic, sectarian" views divide the country.

8. (C) Biographic Note: Ayatollah Hussein al-Sadr is a moderate, well-respected Shi'a leader. His wife and Moqtada al Sadr's wife are sisters. He returned to Iraq in 2003 from London.

9. (C) Comment: A major challenge to USG interests during negotiations leading to a new Iraqi government will be to strengthen the moderate Shi'a clerics, whose religious

philosophy opposes political Islam. Radical Shi'a clerics and militias will seek to impose a sectarian government on Iraq, even if it means conceding Kirkuk to the Kurds, which may speed Kurdish aspirations for independence. Ayatollah Sadr represents a counterweight to the followers of the strand of political Islam championed by the late Ayatollah Khomeini. Hussein al-Sadr would also balance Iran's challenge to Iraq's national and secular identity.

LITT